

SARAH WINCHESTER AND HER HOUSE:
HOW A LEGEND GROWS

BRUCE SPOON
MARCH 31, 1951

The historian's job in part is to separate fact from legend. Unfortunately, too often he discards the legend with no consideration. In the study of legends, however, there arises two kinds of fact: the original story which has served as the basis for the legend, and the fact that there is a legend. They are equally important. The original story or incident is important because it tells what actually happened; the legend is important because it tells about the people into whose hands the original story fell. Why are we told that Washington never lied? Some future historian will say perhaps that this legend served two purposes, to give the new country, the United States, a national hero, and to give children a model in conduct to strive toward. That is, a legend serves a function which the original story, left unaltered, would not fulfill. The historian, then, should be concerned with both as facts: the original story, the true happening, and the legend, how it grew, why it grew.

I

THE LEGEND OF SARAH WINCHESTER: THE LADY AND HER HOUSE¹

Sarah L. Winchester was alone in the large beautiful home her husband had built for her on Prospect Street. The last few years had been a different life from the middle-class circle she had grown up in. She had been so happy with her William and her baby. Life couldn't have been better: respected in the community, married to the son of one of the richest men in New Haven, a 'captain of industry'. William was well on his way to follow the family line, and Sarah was very much in love.

This house was his expression of that love, his present to her, and though it was a beautiful Victorian white, the gloom now made grey the walls of the rooms. Tragedy had struck her hard: her baby had died a month after birth. Her husband told her the news gently, while the thunder and lightning mocked from outside, but her grief was more than she could bear. William, too, was hurt but stoically comforted her and assured her they would yet have a family to be proud of. William died a month later of tuberculosis, while the storm again raged over the Connecticut sea-town.

Sarah sold the house and departed on a long trip around the world. Before she left, however, a friend arranged for her to see a medium who could tell her where to turn. Sarah had had a definite but somewhat repressed interest in the unseen, and her friends had smiled at what they called a "hopeless search for what you're not supposed to know". Now she was free to follow her own avocation.

She toured Europe and the Orient in search of knowledge of occult mysteries which later she was to use. Mediums of London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome became her friends. In India she visited teachers and masters of Yogi. Her long travels were those of a student seeking laws of the invisible world that she might apply them herself. Although she had inherited a great fortune, and received an income of one-thousand dollars a day from royalties on the Winchester rifle, she was known as a woman of means who was devoting her life to an exploration of the unknown world. A cautious though not skeptical person, in most cases she held seances under her own test conditions, usually in her hotel room or the villa that she leased for several months.

And invariably the mediums with whom she experimented, were able to describe her past life in detail. They told of her husband and child, of her New England home, and predicted that she would settle on the Pacific Coast and build, through her guides, a remarkable center for her personal investigations.

She learned the reason why her family had been killed, and how the thunder and lightning would again visit her — on the day she would die: the ghosts of all the victims of the Winchester rifles were seeking revenge, and would succeed on her, too, unless she would build for them a final resting place.

1 The journalistic style of this first section is due to the fact that it is drawn from magazines, newspapers, verbal accounts, and the author's own memories of the legend.

One message stood out above all others, with a promise that her psychic work would continue virtually so long as she desired: "Death will never come while your home is under construction. You must build and build and build. So long as hammers sound and the hum of saws is heard, you will live to carry on your work."

Her tour ended in the Santa Clara Valley of California where she purchased a small house. Here she put the knowledge she had gained into effect.

She did not fear death, since she was convinced it meant only a transition. Yet she knew that most human lives were all too short for the completion of such vindication as she was compelled to perform in the name of Winchester. If her own years could be increased, her opportunity would be so much the greater.

And strangely or not, the promise was kept.

For forty years, she employed a group of 24 carpenters, building, tearing down, and reconstructing a house for her ghostly visitors.

Rather than be hindered by worldly distractions, she became a complete recluse: she built an unscalable fence around the grounds, and hid her work from view by thick, high hedges. She would do no shopping, but would order stores to bring their whole line of goods out to the house, where her private secretary, the only person ever to come face-to-face with her, would purchase often the whole lot. She built a driveway going right into her house so that no one would see her.

She was always clad in black and was covered with so many veils, she appeared to be one of the ghosts herself.

Of course there were no human callers permitted. When members of the local four hundred from nearby San Jose presented cards to be admitted for a social visit, the secretary curtly returned the cards with the reply that "Mrs. Winchester has never bothered anybody, and wishes no one to bother her. Good day." When President Theodore Roosevelt was on tour of the West Coast, the Chamber of Commerce of the bustling San Jose wished to take him on a visit. When the President's party rang at her beautiful front door, they were instructed by a voice from the inside to go around to the servants' entrance, whereupon they were told Mrs. Winchester would see no one. The president of the Chamber of Commerce insisted, exclaiming that the President of the United States was calling and wished to see Mrs. Winchester. At this point the servants, gathered by a fierce loyalty to their unseen mistress, rallied around the door prepared to defend her privacy against the President and all the armed might of the Nation. T. R. saved the day by taking the hint and requesting that his party retreat.

And the building went on. Secret passageways, trap doors, all the makings of a movie thriller filled the walls behind the high hedges. A mad jumble of domes, cupolas, towers and minarets, with few floors on the same level; a ghosts' barroom, cocktail lounge, dance floor, and banquet hall in which only spectral guests were sumptuously wined and dined; stairways ending in mid-air, doors which open to the outside from the second and third stories, but without any means of descent to the ground except that provided by the laws of gravity; peepholes for Mrs. Winchester to watch her servants; chimneys which have no outlet to the outside, and one room with four heat registers and four fireplaces; stairs with steps two and one-half inches high which twist and turn back and forth and rise only eight and one-half feet; all stairways with thirteen stairs, her lucky number; floors with skylights and dark rooms below them; a hothouse on the second floor; water faucets under second and third story windows; bars on inner windows; screen doors on inside doorways, all this making up a sprawling Victorian tumor covering 160 acres.

Without visitors, without any company except her private secretary and her ghostly visitors, the strange old woman directed the construction of the nightmarish edifice, a stooped, pale, grey-haired figure in dragging robes of funereal black, Mrs. Winchester, a veritable ghost herself, prowled through her ghostly mansion. The pounding of rain on the many separate roofs of her house, the thud of carpenters' hammers and the cries of frightened new servants, most of whom remained only until the departure of the next train, vied with the spectral commands which rang only in Sarah Winchester's ears.

Some of the workmen were made of sterner stuff. At least two of them remained throughout the forty years' period of the widow's residence. With the servants, however, it was an entirely different matter. The widow's startling appearances through the doors of the immense iceboxes with which the kitchens were equipped and her frequent midnight visits to their own bedrooms, arriving by way of the clothes closets, threw them into paroxysms of terror. From the servants' viewpoint another grievance was the bathrooms. In the immense pile there are thirteen bathrooms fitted with all manner of gold-plated and silver-plated fixtures, but Sarah Winchester would allow them to be equipped only with clear glass doors.

Stocked with choicest wines and liquors, the spooks' barroom occupied a large part of the main floor. An immense mahogany bar, complete with buffet, bronze footrail, and even gold-plated spittoons, contributed to the comfort of the spectral guests.

Off the reception hall is the spooks' ballroom. Twenty by forty feet in size, it is paneled in carved birds' eye maple and decorated with silver and gold leaf. There during the owner's lifetime, weekly dances were held without a single human guest. Sarah Winchester arrayed in the voluminous finery of her day greeted her spectral visitors and led them through ghostly waltzes and cotillions.

Outside the front of the house in the awesome formal garden she had made a statue of her spirit guide, Chief Little Faun, drawing a bow in futile attempt against the Winchester 75 which killed him.

Every midnight and at one and two in the morning, the giant bell in the high belfry was rung to welcome the spirits. Passers-by heard ghostly music and sawing during these hours. During her seances she would go alone to the 'White Satin Room' and remain for hours. This room had but one window in it and the walls were draped with yards of white satin. This room was the hub of many secret passageways which were designed to allow her secrecy in going to her compelling communions with the spirit world. Later in her life, when Mrs. Winchester became confined to a wheelchair, a servant would wheel her to the door, be dismissed, and the widow would wheel herself in and lock the door. On one occasion this servant stayed on, and, eavesdropping, heard Mrs. Winchester get up from her chair and walk to and fro: an act doctors had pronounced impossible.

Her building pursuits were interrupted only once - on the morning of April 18, 1906. She was sleeping in her bedroom, the sun was just ready to rise, and the land had the hush of an expectant aura, when the earth was torn asunder, and her large house creaked and groaned under the impact of the most destructive earthquake in California's history. Located between two dangerous faults, the San Andreas and the Hayward, the Santa Clara Valley floor rippled and buckled in wave-like motions, and Sarah Winchester's house being large and of wood frame, fared very badly. The large ghost bell gave a few feverish peals before the whole belfry crashed to the earth along with an eighty foot glass tower. Rafters fell, carrying walls, towers, and chimneys. Mrs. Winchester, frightened doubly by feeling this was an expression of spiritual discontent at her endeavors, was trapped in her bedroom by debris which sealed windows and doors. By the time the servants had recovered from the first shock, they heard her screams and pleas for help. They had to chop her out of her imprisonment.

During the next day, while San Francisco was being consumed by its great fire, Sarah Winchester, her wits shattered more than ever, gathered her few belongings, and fled by carriage to Atherton, some twenty miles north, where she bought a houseboat at a fabulous price, and there lived for several years.

When she returned to the site of her home, the debris was still scattered about, although the hammers had kept building, and she ordered the whole front section of the house boarded up and permitted no one ever to enter it again. If the spirits were dissatisfied with that part, she would abandon it and try to placate their fury with building up the other sections. Rooms were added, torn down, and rebuilt. She was forced to buy additional land and eventually the main house overtook and engulfed the stables and garages.

Despite her aloofness and eccentricities, Mrs. Winchester was a woman of charm, cultured, educated, fluent in several languages, a lover of music, art and literature. She found happiness and satisfaction in her hermitic existence, a life of icy regal splendor and lonely, often pathetic grandeur. During her long career in 'Spirit House' she never visited another home, never entered a church or public building nor did she ride upon a train.

The house was strung with miles of wire, and walls were studded with pushbuttons, communicating devices and other gadgets whose use are still a mystery. In all those long years, incidentally, not one member of Mrs. Winchester's staff ever saw the whole house and, like Bluebeard's wife, were ordered to keep out of certain rooms.

The massive front door with entrancing cut-glass panels, is worth two thousand dollars. The tragedy of this lovely portal is that it swung open but thrice during its forty years' service: for the entry and exit of the late Mary Baker Eddy, schoolmate and dear friend of Mrs. Winchester, and for the still form of the mistress to be borne out when death would not be stayed.

Apparently she had no anticipation of death, thinking of herself as virtually immortal, for upon her death she had enough lumber supply to keep building for forty or fifty years more.

The end came to Sarah Winchester in 1922. Her workmen on September 5 of that year became engrossed in a game of stud poker, and had retreated to a far garage to escape the rare storm which was rocking the whole community, and for the first time since 1884 the ring of hammers and the buzz of saws was not heard. Mrs. Winchester lay dead.

Subsequently when the great house was stripped of its furniture and the dark halls began echoing to the whir and musty odor of hundreds of bats, the property was put up for sale and bought by a Mr. and Mrs. John Brown. They have operated the gaunt skeleton, of which only five stories remain, as a museum for some thirty years.

II

THE TRUE PICTURE

That is the legend; or rather a composite of all the many versions of the legend. It is entertaining, but only the smallest part of it is true. The rest of this study is the 'cold shower' treatment where the true facts are shown, the legend's alterations become clear, and the original story is exposed. The narrative to follow will give a sobering account of how the passage of time since Mrs. Winchester's death has obscured and changed the original story of her life.

Sarah Winchester was brought up in New Haven, Connecticut, in the era of Victorian fussiness, reconstruction, bustles, and croquet games in formal gardens on sunny afternoons. Sarah's family, the Pardees lived on Brown Street which was just a little lower in prestige than the fine homes of Prospect Street. Sarah fell in love with William Wirt Winchester, one of the more eligible bachelors in New Haven, and in marrying him moved up the social ladder. William was the son of Oliver Fischer Winchester who had a partnership in a rifle firm which gave the family a fine income. Oliver had sold his shirt manufacturing business a few years before to join a Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson of Norwich in the production of a rifle these two men had patented in 1854.² The firm had great success, and under the leadership of Winchester, its first president and a true captain of industry, it skyrocketed. Oliver's dynamic business mind let nothing stand in the way of the development of his firm as this unintentionally revealing sentence in the company magazine shows: "Those who were in the employ of the Company during his lifetime express in the kindest terms their affection for the governor and of his personal interest in them; the only question he asked being, 'Will it interfere in any way with company work?'"

If Oliver were the epitome of rugged individualism, William's mother was the Victorian ideal of womanhood. She was dutiful to her husband, ran her household well, and produced three healthy children. Above that she managed well after her husband's death, "using nobly and faithfully the great wealth entrusted to her care."³ Indeed Jane Winchester was an ideal for Sarah to strive for, and whether consciously or not, Sarah Winchester managed to be more kind and generous in her later life than William's mother ever was.

This was the family Sarah married into on September 30, 1862. William was being groomed to take over his father's place at the company, and even the end of the Civil War failed to stop the demand for the Winchester rifle. The westward movement provided a greater demand for the company product and William found himself in a position of leading an even greater expansion than his father had affected. Things couldn't have been brighter for Sarah Pardee Winchester than in those days: William was building for her a beautiful home

²Winchester Record, Vol. I, No. 14 (Feb. 14, 1919).

³Fanny Winchester Hotchkiss, Winchester Notes (New Haven, 1912) p. 251.

⁴New Haven Colony Historical Society, Dana Collection, XLII, 32.

at 194 Prospect Street⁴ which would enable them to meet the social committments William's position demanded and the social position William and Sarah had inherited from Oliver and Jane Winchester.

Then tragedy struck. Sarah's first baby, Annie, died a little over a month after it was born. The New Haven Register carried a two line obituary: "Died — in this city July 24th — Annie Pardee, infant daughter of W. W. and Sarah L. Winchester."⁵ Sarah and William lived in their large house keeping up the name of Winchester, but badly hit by the death of their daughter. William became ill with pulmonary tuberculosis, and though he had a "retiring disposition"⁶ normally, their life together became restricted. When no other child ensued from their marriage, it became morose. In the nineteenth year of their marriage, sixteen years after Annie's death, William took a turn for the worse, and after being rushed from New York, he died in their home on March 7, 1881. He was forty-three years old.⁷ She was now alone.

Between this year and the year 1884 when she arrived in California, there is no evidence of her actions. That she was in contact with a medium is doubtful; she engaged a Baptist minister for her husband's funeral, and she herself was a member of the Episcopal Church.⁸ In fact the whole world trip is new to this writer who had grown up in San Jose with the rest of the legend, and no evidence can be found in the New Haven papers that she did go.

The Eastern lightning storms which Mrs. Winchester supposedly thought were spiritual messages were nothing but a phase of the climate of New Haven as a whole with which she had unpleasant associations. They were no more important in her decision to move than snow, ice, wind or any other manifestations of a harsh New England winter: she was seeking a mild climate to spend her remaining years in ease. Indeed, New Haven had many unbearable memories to her. (She was coaxed to visit Mills College by sister married to a Sprague — Bertha Gramer findings.)

She took with her from New Haven a favorite servant, who was also very devoted to her, and since his hobby was carpentry, she bought an unfinished eight room house on some small acreage for one of her sisters intending to build her own later.⁹ But she became absorbed in remodeling it, and when the sister didn't arrive, she planned more and more rooms, with the idea of providing separate family quarters in one connected structure for as many of her relatives as she could persuade to come west.¹⁰ By remodeling the house, she kept her friendly servant busy in his avocation, and also kindled a latent designing talent she herself had. She bought a few books on architecture, and would sketch her ideas, sometimes on both sides of a scrap of paper, and have

5 New Haven Daily Register, July 25, 1866.

6 Ibid., March 8, 1881.

7 Registrar of Vital Statistics, City of New Haven, Records, Death, Vol. XXIV, 276.

8 Correspondence from Mrs. Minnie Yeager Hall to the author, March 2, 1951. Hereafter cited as Hall Correspondence.

9 Chas. A Payne, Recorder for County of Santa Clara, reports he can find no record of purchase of 30 acres of land by Mrs. Winchester from Dr. Caldwell. He did find a "deed from J. A. Hamm to Sarah L. Winchester of 44 and 83/100 acres, June 19, 1886 which answers the description of her holdings."

10 Weldon Melick, "Sevenscore Gables", Holiday, (Feb., 1947) p. 39. Hereafter cited as Melick in Holiday.

them executed by a corps of carpenters, painters, tile-setters, plumbers, and other workmen hired as the need arose.

Her house, originally of eight rooms, inexorably became larger. To the people of San Jose, accustomed to the ways of a small western town, the result seemed a mansion, when to Mrs. Winchester it was no more ornate or overly large than many of the homes in her own New Haven at the time. Pictures of Oliver Winchester's house on Prospect Street show a monstrous Victorian affair with a beautiful formal garden, an acre of hothouses; certainly, Sarah Winchester's home in San Jose was no more grotesque than the others of fashionable Prospect Hill.¹¹ If she had chosen San Francisco, instead of San Jose, her house would have ranked quite nicely with the mansions of Huntington, Crocker, Mark Hopkins, and Leland Stanford on Nob Hill. But the reception her house received was not that given to a sideshow freak. In fact, her house, long before it reached its final stage, gave rise to much community pride; a place which the townspeople would come Sunday afternoons to gape at from their carriages. Llanada Villa, as she named it, was not her only house on the West Coast. She had another at Menlo Park, California, which, though it too was a mansion, was "not unusual for that type of house".¹²

Ever since she had moved to San Jose in 1884, Mrs. Winchester had enjoyed talking with neighbors in the garden. Because of her weak health she would spend much time in the garden or orchard, putting about in the sunshine, and to sit on the grass and chat with her workmen or neighbors was one of her joys. Around the turn of the century, however, her health became worse. She developed a painful arthritis which settled in her hands and knees, making walking particularly difficult, and deforming her small stature considerably. Because she wished no sympathy from her friends, and because the outdoor life she had grown to love became physically impossible, Sarah Winchester drew into her house more and more. At this time there arose neighborhood speculation as to why she no longer could be seen among her trees and gardens. This was the start of what has become the legend of Sarah Winchester and her ghosts.

Mrs. Winchester had a room set aside as one where privacy could be found in a house full of servants. There is apparent confusion in the legend as to whether it was decorated in blue or white satin. Sarah, confined now by a wheelchair, would have a servant wheel her to the room, would enter, lock the door and remain for sometimes three or four hours. The room held the personal effects of her deceased husband and daughter: clippings, fishlines, socks and woolen underwear, and a pillbox containing four strands of blond hair, and the clipping, "Died — in this city July 24th — Annie Pardee.....". The servant told of taking Mrs. Winchester to this room, and after the door was shut, misconstrued this sacred privilege of meditation as communion with spirits for the purpose of receiving instructions from them. This unfortunate speculation on the part of the servant added to the embryonic legend by giving the neighbors an hypothesis — that of spiritualism — to work on. From this, the idea of her believing that constant building meant immortality for her, grew in a very short time. The first appearance of it, comes in an article in a San Francisco paper, which was brought

¹¹ New Haven Colony Historical Society, Dana Collection, XLII, pp. 16, 17.

¹² Hall Correspondence.

to Mrs. Winchester's attention by one of her workmen. Mrs. Winchester was "much annoyed by the published story and laid off the builders. She went to Del Monte (a fashionable beach hotel of the time on Monterey Bay) and other places for extended stays, and it was not until a year later that building operations were resumed on the place".¹³ Her trip is consistent with her attempts at dealing with unhappiness by running away from it. Also, by interrupting her building program for a whole year she tried to stop the malicious gossip by showing how ridiculous was the thought that she was mortally afraid of the ceasing of hammers. The legend persisted, however, and when Mrs. Winchester returned to her home, she "strictly minded her own business and did not let the public share in it".¹⁴ By becoming more guarded in her actions, Mrs. Winchester unknowingly added to the legend, for the neighbors "sort of resented that; a rather natural tendency, even yet, I believe."¹⁵ Even today her departure and subsequent interruption in work makes little impression on those continuing to believe that she heard the hammers and saws until the day of the fatal game of stud poker.

Her 'reclusiveness' however, has been greatly expanded in the legend. She did not build an 'unscalable fence' around her house. There was a cypress hedge, along the front of the place, with gates at intervals.... Besides the one gate always being open on the street side, anyone could easily either go in one of the numerous holes in the hedge or climb over or through the rail fence gates that were at three of the openings....there was no idea of shielding....it from view, it was a mere protection for the beautiful gardens...¹⁶

Mr. Clyde Arbuckle, now the County Historian, tells how she used to enjoy taking drives in her carriage and later in her lavender Pierce-Arrow so that she could see the town and wave to passers-by. This bluntly contradicts the legend. She also had a French Renault and a Buick which her chauffeur kept in good order at all times, and in one of them she was able to get out into the open air she loved. The driveway which "runs into the house" is nothing but a covered extension from the house which besides being good protection from rain, facilitated her passage into the house by wheelchair, and hid her crippled walking from neighbors. On many of her outings, she would have her driver park on the curb where the store proprietors would gladly bring their goods to the sidewalk so she would not have to pain herself with getting in and out of the vehicle. When the illness became to great for even her rides, the stores gladly delivered directly to her house. It was not because of her reclusiveness.

But the legend grew, and everything she did became connected with the spiritual. When many wandered by the house during the night hours and heard music or the hum of saws, to them it was obviously music of the ghosts and spectral sawing. It was music they heard, but it was not produced by ghosts; the sawing sounds were from a saw but it was not wielded by a specter. Mrs. Winchester had an organ in her bedroom and, when physical pain or mental anguish made sleep impossible, would rise and "seek surcease at the keys of her instrument".¹⁷ Mrs. Winchester had also bought a handsaw for exercising her knarled hands.¹⁸

¹³ E. F. Wolters, Mrs. Winchester's plumber, quoted in the R. Kelty Collection of articles on the Winchester House. Hereafter cited as Kelty Collection.

¹⁴ Hall Correspondence.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Joseph A. Hawkins, "Taking Mystery out of the Mystery House", New Haven Register, (Jan. 7, 1940). Hereafter cited as Hawkins in the New Haven Register.

¹⁸ Melick in Holiday.

Her arthritic condition also takes care of the 'goofy stairs' which have given so much delight to the sightseers who have passed through her house since her death. They lead to her storeroom where she kept her many vases, candelabra, and beautiful art treasures. What could be more sensible than the 'easy risers' which enabled her to go to that favored room and pick the decorations for the house. With two and one-half inch steps and narrow bannisters for support, it must have done much to help her to be among the fine art objects she cherished so much.

Mrs. Winchester's love of nature and gardens was as great as her love of fine art and furnishings. She maintained a large number of Japanese gardeners for whom she built a comfortable home across from the main house. Tommy, her head gardener, was so devoted in return for the kindness she showed him that when at last she died, he "was so deeply grieved...that he died shortly afterwards".¹⁹ A neighbor who admired some of Mrs. Winchester's trees, shortly thereafter saw Tommy wheeling several of these trees (My Dad, M.Y.H.) to his home as a gift from the old woman. When her activity in the garden was stopped by her illness, she had built on the second floor a hothouse with a system for watering the flowers and ferns, and an ingenious metal drain system which carried the surplus water to the ground. The happiness she received from gardening was not stopped by her health; indeed, her ingenious idea for keeping nature close to her, coupled with the finances to carry it out, would have evoked respect from Mohammed. The trap doors, rather than being passageways for ghosts, were for facilitating the plumbing installations.

The Theodore Roosevelt episode is obscured in time. Many versions exist of which that given in the first section is the most wild and least likely. The more conservative accounts say that the Chamber of Commerce sent her a letter requesting the permission of a call by the Chief Executive, but when the request was denied, the Chamber proceeded no further.²⁰ One article makes no mention of Teddy Roosevelt at all, but says she refused permission to a congressman.²¹ There is absolutely no evidence that a president's party ever set out for her house.

There is doubt even that Mrs. Winchester was in the house at the time of the earthquake. Whether she was nor not, the earthquake of 1906 left a great deal of ruin in Mrs. Winchester's house. The front part of the house was much more ornately built than the rear, and the 'quake destroyed much of the elaborate sandstone finish on the outside. It collapsed a wing, shattered chimneys, broke ornate windows, and the front of the house was almost completely beyond repair. Mrs. Winchester talked of wrecking the place, remarking, "It looks as though it had been built by a crazy person."²² Rather than tear down what her carpenter had created, which was the crowning glory in construction in his long career of carpentry, she decided since her primary purpose had been ruined, and since the section was unsafe, to just seal off that part of the house and build what she wanted behind it. She had the unsafe sections pulled off or boarded up.

19 E. F. Wolters, quoted in Kelty Collection.

20 "Winchester Mystery House", San Jose Chamber of Commerce Pamphlet,
(Jan. 10, 1945)

21 Melick in Holiday.

22 Ibid.

That would account for the outside door on the third floor which couldn't possibly be of any use to anyone but a parachutist. Aside from the earthquake, since her plans were those of an amateur, she was bound to make mistakes. With the money to afford it, she blithely demolished what was wrong and started over, hid them with drapes, built right over them, or simply left them undisguised.

The floor with a skylight may have been a roof at one time. The bar-protected inside windows were undoubtedly on the outside of the house until further building enclosed them. The same is true for the screened inside doors. The chimneys that seem never to reach the outside were obviously built over after the brick on the outside tumbled. The stairs leading to blank walls once led to wings which no longer exist. The exterior faucets on the second floor probably had window boxes under them.

The bathrooms were equipped, some with glass doors, others with screen doors so that Mrs. Winchester might be observed and helped if she fainted and fell.²³ The peepholes served either for this same purpose or for the servants carrying trays of food not to collide with swinging doors. So-called secret passageways --- supposedly for ghosts --- were none other than short cuts between rooms for the use of the servants. Several fireplaces in a very small radius was not so fantastic since each was intended for a single suite of rooms built for the specific guests from the East, whom she intended entertaining.²⁴ The bell was used for calling workers in from the gardens and orchards for meals, and not to summon ghosts three times a night. The statue of Chief Little Faun is no more than a garden piece of art. Mrs. Hall, who grew up as a neighborhood child in and around the Winchester House tells of a fact perhaps unknown to any except those who grew up in the gardens:

There was the figure of a kneeling Indian, aiming an arrow. Sighting along the arrow, at perhaps 200 feet distant is the statue of a deer, with head high in the attitude of surprise. When the foliage was on the shrubs the deer was practically invisible from the Indian statue unless you knew exactly where to look.

There are only a few staircases with thirteen stairs. Even these held no magical symbolism to Sarah Winchester; they were the idea of her carpenter²⁵. James Perkins, who worked for Sarah "sometime during the Cleveland administration", went so far as to claim, "They must have been put there after Mrs. Winchester died."²⁶

That the expensive front doors opened only three times --- for the visit of Mary Baker Eddy and to carry out the body of the dead mistress --- makes a touching story, but is not true. The door was opened several times for cleaning,²⁷ and she died at her home in Menlo Park. (Correction --- according to vital statistics at Hall of Records, she died Sept. 5, 1922, in Campbell, Meridian District on Los Gatos Road.) After her death, the lumber that was found which was thought to be her supply for forty or fifty years' building was nothing more than material for the repair of a cesspool.²⁸

²³ Hawkins in New Haven Register.

²⁴ Hall Correspondence.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ San Jose Evening News, (Sept. 12, 1946).

²⁷ Kelty Collection.

²⁸ San Jose Mercury Herald, (Aug. 5, 1925). Quoted statement by R. F. Leib, her attorney.

Her latent designing talent, aside from giving her something to occupy her last years, also produced many quite sound manifestations of itself. She had window shutters opened by a crank on the inside of the windows; a spray shower at shoulder level so as to avoid getting her hair wet; rock wool insulation; a window catch fashioned after the Winchester trigger and trip-hammer; hinged iron drops in fireplaces for the disposal of ashes; curved plates in the corner of stairs to avoid the creation of dust pockets; and other features which, though being new at the time and probably only adding to the legend about the eccentricities of the little widow, have proven their soundness and are in common use today. A porcelain wash tub with a built-in wash board later figured in a Chicago patent suit of an irate inventor who claimed an American manufacturing firm had stolen his idea. The firm lawyers produced pictures taken of such a tub, used by Mrs. Winchester's household some fifty years before when the plaintiff was still a baby. The case was thrown out of court.²⁹

Sarah Winchester was interested in every fixture in her large house, and had a remarkable memory for details concerning it. Once one of her workmen took six small brass colored screws from the warehouse to fix a gate. The next day he was summoned by his mistress and asked if he had taken them. When he told her he had, she calmly asked him to get them at once: they were solid gold and were to be used for "something special".³⁰ She prided herself on knowing the location of every piece of material in the house.

Outside of her house, Sarah Winchester was a wise business woman. Her business investments and business dealings enhanced her original legacy, and she left a sizeable fortune even after building so large a home. Because she was an heir to the Winchester Company, when it was reorganized after the first World War, her opinions had to be solicited by company officials. Her will was unique in the sound disposal of her vast fortune: it provides from special created trust funds incomes for the majority of the beneficiaries only while they live. After their death, the principal is to revert to the General Hospital Society of Connecticut. She established in her husband's memory a tubercular hospital in West Haven, which is today part of the tubercular annex of the New Haven Grace Hospital. During her life, up to the dedication of the hospital on May 18, 1918, she had given to it \$1,325,000 and her will ensures its continuance for many years more.

This generosity in her business transactions was often completely anonymous. The supplies of food and drink which the legend says she supplied to her larder because she thought the ghosts were consuming it, was actually no more than her way of keeping the help satisfied. She always gave turkeys and presents to her workers on Thanksgiving and Christmas, and during a depression she paid her workers \$3.00 a day when the general wage was \$1.50. She would not subscribe to any collections or funds being raised, but in many instances when the collected funds were counted there would be an anonymous contribution of substantial sum, no one willing to say where it came from; on several occasions donations from an 'unknown giver' much exceeded all others.³¹ She once instructed her lawyer, Leib, to make a \$300,000 gift for her under strict orders not to reveal its source. She was a determined woman when anything stood in the

29 Dean Jennings, "The House that Tragedy Built", Coronet Magazine, (May, 1945).
Hereafter cited as Jennings in Coronet.

30 Ibid.

31 Hall Correspondence.

way of her business practices. Mr. James Perkins, one of her loyal carpenters, tells of the time when the carpenters' union tried to get us to join... They threatened to stop delivery of lumber if we didn't join, and Mrs. Winchester told them that if they didn't leave us alone, she would spend \$100,000 and put up a mill of her own. She had enough money to do just that, too.³²

The story told by Attorney Jensen accents the often obscured kindness of Mrs. Winchester: ... about the 1909 and 1910 ... I, as a newspaper carrier delivered the San Jose Mercury Herald to the home of Mrs. Winchester, and on several occasions I talked to her personally (these were the years after the earthquake she was supposed to have spent in the houseboat at Atherton), and although there was supposed to be a lot of secrecy in and about her home, and that she was an eccentric person (sic), she never appeared so to me. I recall one occasion when I called on her at her home as a small boy and requested permission from her to shoot robins with my air gun. Of course, she refused me permission, but I will always remember her giving me the complete story of the life of a robin and how they were hunger driven from the snow and ice clad slopes of the Sierras down to the warm valleys along the coast. It made such an impression upon me that never again did I ever shoot at any song bird ...³³

Legend moves through the element, time, much as the party game where some sentence is whispered around a circle of guests only to appear completely changed. In the case of Sarah Winchester it is carried either involuntarily and unconsciously by those individuals who pass it on verbally and change it so as to make themselves more important with the sensationalism of the exaggeration; or purposely by groups who stand to gain from the propagation of the legend.

The form is typified by the sense of local pride which makes those around San Jose wish to enlarge upon the assets of the community by exclaiming, "Look, we even have a spook house built by a crazy woman who thought that as long as she built she would live". An interesting facet of the way a community pride enters in is the way New Haven has steadfastly defended her actions. The New Haven Journal Courier³⁴ in her obituary commented that "... her residence in San Jose was said to be one of the most beautiful in that section". The contrast is further seen from looking at Hearst's San Francisco Examiner³⁵ and the New Haven Register Sunday section³⁶. The San Francisco article is in the 'Smart Set' section in 'Freddie Francisco's column', and in the best cute society columnist style makes puns on ghosts drinking highballs, and makes quips about Leib's calling Mrs. Winchester "as sane as any woman I've known". The New Haven article which one would suppose to be lurid in the Sunday supplement tradition, treats the whole legend as a legend and tries to show the falsity of it, playing up the West Haven Hospital story with sincerity and tact. The ironic twist we find here is that the community in which she chose to live and spend her life, reveres her memory with ridicule and laughter, whereas the

32 San Jose Evening News, (Sept. 2, 1946)

33 Letter from E. D. Jensen to the author, (Feb. 15, 1951)

34 Sept. 8, 1922

35 April 19, 1928

36 Jan. 7, 1940

community she left behind has nothing but praise for her. The hospital she left is a real factor in this different treatment, as is the name of Winchester, which is synonymous in some minds with New Haven. The Bay Area of the West Coast, too, has gone through a tremendous change in population since her death in 1922, and in this transition period, the newcomer hears only the legend, usually in verbal form. Children play an important part in the legend's continuance and unconscious growth. A little boy waiting for the guide to show his family through the house, asked, "Daddy, when are we going in the house where the murder took place?"

The Chamber of Commerce seems to border between the involuntary and the intentional. The gain to be made by its furthering the legend is indirectly economical, and the California brand of Chamber of Commerce has always made quick gain from anything true, false, or half-true, which helps it in its purpose. Its pamphlets on the Winchester House are written with little evidence of historical research, and are of the journalistic type attempted in the first section of this paper.

The magazines, with the one exception of Holiday, are written down to the level of their readers and are purposely exaggerated for the sensationalism of the legend. The adjectives used in describing the house are designed to convey the sensational aspect: "awkward", "spook", "grotesque", "ambling", "ghost", "nightmarish", "monstrous", "queer-shaped", "spirit" are only a handful of the many which took either very inventive journalistic minds or deep probings into Roget's Thesaurus. The titles and 'spreads' are in the main those promising the supernatural and the extraordinary. The National Spiritualist appropriately heads its title, "The House that Spirits Built", and its article explains the legend through spiritual terms. The first part of this paper is taken largely from the publication and is a good indication of what I mean. The Modern Mechanix Magazine had an article written by Dean Jennings, called, "The House that Death Built". It starts out by setting the scene as follows:

Dead leaves, whipped from stark lonely trees by the valley wind, sing a dirge in the night glow of a winter's moon. Behind the skeleton screen of withered oaks whose rotting limbs droop to pungent ground, you can see the house, gabled and gaunt, rising wraith-like against a blue shadowed mountain backdrop.

Mr. Jennings also wrote a later article for the Coronet Magazine in which he was forced to be a little more rational and a little less florid. He titled it, "The House that Tragedy Built", and apparently did more than read the Chamber of Commerce brochure for it. The Family Circle Magazine presented an awesome spread with red ghosts cavorting over the page, and titled it "\$5,000,000 SP000000K HOUSE". The Readers' Digest did no more than print an anecdote about the house called, "The House that Just Grew". The National Motorist Magazine, interested in getting tourists on the road, wrote of "The House that Spirits Built". The most rational and fair magazine article was that of Meldon Melick in Holiday, titled "Sevenscore Gables". And so it goes; each giving its readers fare appropriate to their tastes and level.

The present owners, apparently quite intentionally, remain taciturn upon the legend of Sarah Winchester. The reasons are quite obvious: the charge is 90¢ per adult, and 35,000 persons annually gaze at the house and listen to the guides relate the lurid, fascinating legend. Mr. and Mrs. John Brown, wise to the ways

of a side-show attraction after running boardwalk concessions in Southern California bought the house in 1923 from a niece who was apparently so eager to get rid of it that she accepted practically nothing: a reported \$20,000. Not averse to any publicity about the house, the Browns have added two rooms to the house for themselves to live in and have been making a living from it for thirty years.

Mrs. Winchester's house is a big one. That is one fact that stands in evidence and can't be changed until the house falls. To Mrs. Winchester it was her purpose in living: it kept a large crew and its families supplied with income, it gave her an expression of her artistic feelings — no matter how we may look upon Victorian architecture today — , and it helped occupy her grief-stricken mind. I think the psychiatrist may have hit upon it when he said, "Mrs. Winchester suffered a great shock with the loss of her husband and child so this house became the instinctive and symbolic expression of an unfulfilled desire wherein every room represented the creation and presence of a child. Building is for a woman a maternal expression".³⁷ Most of the viewers of the house, even with the lurid and illustrative legend told them by the guides, seem to reserve a certain amount of sympathy for Mrs. Winchester and can understand what she was trying to do. As one reporter put it: "You feel as you reluctantly leave Sarah Winchester's great big playhouse that it's a shame so few people had the privilege of knowing her. She must have been quite a character".³⁸

The legend proves quite feeble alongside the real story. At most, all that can now be said is that the legend is entertaining but really much less so than the true story. Through time, and by various means, some quite unintentional, others pointedly purposive, the legend has grown. Eventually the few who knew Mrs. Winchester personally will die, and with them the true story will also die. Only the legend written in the best manner of sensational journalism will survive.

37 Jennings in Coronet.

38 Melick in Holiday.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Section I, The Legend.

This section was compiled after reading accounts of the legend in newspapers and magazines, and hearing accounts of it while growing up in San Jose. An incomplete list of written articles would include:

American Hawaiian Lines, Aug., 1931
Keith's Beautiful Homes, Nov. 1928
Pictorial California, Oct., 1928
Modern Mechanix, June, 1937
Readers' Digest, Aug., 1938
Coronet, May, 1945
National Spiritualist, June, 1946
National Motorist, July - August, 1946
San Jose Chamber of Commerce Pamphlet
San Jose Mercury Herald
San Jose Evening News
Dearborn Independent
Portland Oregonian
San Francisco Examiner

The legend can almost be traced by taking the articles in chronological order; there was evidence of authors taking some idea from a previous article and adding to it his own conjecture which was just a little more sensational.

Section II, The Facts.

Some of the articles which were written about the legend also supplied much of the true facts. Coronet, May, 1925, was one. Melick's article in Holiday, Feb., 1947, was very solidly written and was used extensively. Several newspaper articles gave information relating to the facts. Among the best were J. A. Hawkins' article in the New Haven Register, Jan. 7, 1940, the San Jose Mercury Herald, Aug. 5, 1925; Sept. 7, 1922; Oct. 7, 1922; June 11, 1911 and the San Jose Evening News, Sept. 2, 1946.

Most of the substance of the second section was derived from private correspondence between the author and those who are familiar with the true story of Mrs. Winchester. Mrs. Minnie Y. Hall was most helpful in telling about her childhood spent as a neighbor. Mr. Elmer Jensen supplied interesting information, as did Mr. Clyde Arbuckle, Historian for the County of Santa Clara, Mr. Chas. A. Payne, Recorder for the County of Santa Clara, and Professor Ralph Williamson of Northwestern University.

Mr. Robert Kelty kindly supplied the author his collection of many articles written about the Winchester House, which were relied upon heavily in the formation of the essay.

The accounts of the true facts in the story written in the above mentioned letters to the author were used with a complete reliance on the integrity and objectivity of the senders. Though the human memory is faulty, it should be remembered that these people, especially Mrs. Hall, have had to re-assert the original story every time the false legend was heard, and this constant reminder of the true facts through the years has kept memory alert.

(Henrietta Noe was companion and secretary to Mrs. Winchester for 12 years)